# Illuminating Spectatorship in Malory's *Morte Darthur*

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Michel Foucault explores the power of sight as social control in his book *Discipline and Punish*, and he credits the development of the modern prison system to a system of surveillance called "panopticism." Jeremy Bentham coined the term in the eighteenth century when he developed a prison called the Panopticon designed to maximize visibility. Not only were prisoners constantly visible to and kept in check by the gaze of the prison guards, but the prison guards themselves were visible to and policed by their supervisors. Although the term panopticism is used most narrowly in relation to prisons, Foucault suggests that the principles of surveillance and social control inherent in the system can be more generally applied to all facets of society grounded on spoken or unspoken laws. Panopticism means "all seeing," and Foucault stresses that every pair of eyes works to enforce social order in a panoptic society. Panopticism operates silently and effectively because of its hierarchical, continuous, and functional nature. Once a system of rules is in place, all members of society can work to maintain those rules by observing other people's behavior. Every-one is employed in this work, and it operates independently of an organized head, which

> "enables the disciplinary power to be both absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert, since by its very principle it leaves no zone of shade and constantly supervises the very individuals who are entrusted with the task of supervising; and absolutely 'discreet,' for it functions permanently and largely in silence" (Foucault 177).

Malory's *Morte Darthur* provides a late medieval example of a highly structured society in which all characters are engaged in a system of surveillance. The surveillance is discreet and entrenched within social rituals, but examining the role of spectators within tournament culture reveals that spectators exercise social control

over other characters' actions during combat, awarding honor to those who perform well and taking away honor from those who do not follow the chivalric code. The tournament space functions as a panopticon in the *Morte Darthur*, and the panoptic gaze gives female spectators the ability to exercise power over knights and to counter the po-tentially objectifying gaze of courtly love.

Malory does not belabor physical description of the tournament field in the *Morte Darthur*, but he does articulate the role and importance of spectators in great detail. Historical and artistic representations of combat contextualize these textual references. The "Book of Sir Tristram," perhaps more than any other book in the *Morte Darthur*, is concerned first and foremost with combat, and there are several tournaments described in detail throughout the book. Spectators assume a variety of roles at these events, serving as official and unofficial judges and as motivation for combat. The "Tournament of Lonezep" provides an excellent representation of the dynamic that exists between watchers and the watched in a medieval panoptic society.

The role of spectators within the *Morte Darthur*, especially in the "Tournament at Lonezep," demonstrates the way that spec–tatorship serves as a form of surveillance, capable of punishing or rewarding participants based on their social behavior. Spectators, officially or unofficially, serve as judges of the combat, a situation made possible because of the system of rules that guides tournaments (and indeed all forms of combat throughout the *Morte Darthur*). The knights within the *Morte Darthur* subscribe to a very regimented set of rules; within that system of rules they fight, and those who fight well while obeying the rules are honored, while those who can only win at fighting by breaking the rules are disgraced. Spectators serve the important function of awarding or removing honor.

The panoptic gaze can only be effective as a means of social control if there is a cost to being caught by others at improper behavior (whatever that behavior might be). Within the world of the *Morte Darthur*, characters fear being publicly shamed, and they take great pains to win honor and maintain a chivalric public persona. As Terence McCarthy explains, "A knight is in search of worship and a reputation; what men will say about him is all that counts" (89). A knight's public actions have potentially far-reaching consequences on society, perhaps even threatening social order and calling into question the ideals of chivalry. McCarthy describes the world of the

*Morte Darthur* as one in which "all the virtues are public not private [. . .]. There is no distinction between being and seeming honest because all the virtues of the Arthurian world are evident for all to *see*" (88-89, emphasis added). Consequently, Malory's characters inhabit a very public sphere, and all of their actions are relevant to the story only so far as they impact the public domain. In a society in which a person is only what he appears to be to others, sight attains a level of preeminence, and everyone with the ability to see and interpret social behavior, regardless of social class or gender, wields enormous social control.

Official spectatorial judges are thus important to the combat in the *Morte Darthur* because they award or remove honor from tournament combatants. At the Tournament of Surluse, for instance, the text reports that "quene Gwenyver, the Haute Prynce, and sir Launcelot, they were sette in scaffoldis [to gyve the jugement of these two knyghtis]" (403). At the conclusion of the battle, "the Haute Prynce and sir Launcelot seyde they saw ne-ver two knyghtes fyght bettir; but ever the straunge knyght [Lamerok] doubled his strokys and put sir Palomydes abak [. . .]. Than quene Gwenyver comended hym [Lamerok], and so did all good knyghtes" (404). As evidenced by this passage, worthy and important knights, as well as worthy and important ladies, are able to serve as official judges at tournaments. Arthur often serves as a judge, as do Lancelot and Guinevere.

A spectator, however, does not have to be an official judge to exercise power. In fact, participants often keep a close eye on both opponents and allies during a tournament, to compare perform-ances and uphold the rules for behavior. When Lamerok sees two of his kinsmen struck down during the Tournament at Surluse he "was wrothe oute of mesure; and than he gate a grete speare in his honde, and therewithall he smote downe four good knyghtes" (408). Knights frequently watch out for their allies on the tournament field and come to their aid when they need help. During the Tournament at Lonezep, Dynadan and Gareth watch out for Tristram, and when Lancelot unknowingly engages Tristram in battle, Dynadan and Gareth rush to his defense. Although Tristram reprimands them for their action, saying "ye do youreselff grete shame," (418) they are willing to take the shame on themselves in order to spare Tristram the disgrace he would assume upon losing to Lancelot and in order to spare Lancelot the shame he would assume in having overcome his friend. Knights frequently engage in spectatorship on the tour-

nament field itself. Palomides keeps a close eye on Tristram and Isode throughout the tournament of Lonezep, and, as a result, he keeps abreast of Tristram's actions throughout the tournament. Only he and Isode see Tristram leave the field at one point; the text says, "they two wolde nat leve off there yghesyght of hym" (456). Thus, all spectators of tournaments really serve as judges of the performance of the knights, and the knights fighting are aware that they can be observed at all times. In the *Morte Darthur*, knights counter this effect by riding out of the list into the woods to change armor or to have wounds treated, but even that measure does not necessarily ensure that they can not be seen by careful spectators. In this way, all tournament participants help to police the actions of all other participants.

Female spectators, in particular, often serve multiple func-tions during a tournament. In addition to serving as official or unofficial judges of the combat, their presence also motivates the knights to perform their best. Steven Pederson explains that "with the increasing presence of ladies came the idea of a tournament in honor of and for the female observers" (12). Arthur decides to host the Tournament at Lonezep after hearing the story of Tristram and Isode's escape from Mark, and Isode is crucial to the chapter as a spectator and as a catalyst for the actions of other characters. Tristram and Palomides fight to win honor to please her throughout the tournament, and Arthur is willing to fight with Tristram and Palomides in order to look at Isode: "'As for that,' seyde kynge Arthure, 'I woll se her, for I take no force whom I gryeve'" (452). Palomides takes offence at Arthur's looking at Isode, and he begins a fight with Arthur and Lancelot that ends when he is knocked from his horse by Lancelot. Tristram reprimands Palomides for attacking Arthur, justifying the king's actions by saying "the knyghtes came hyddir of there jantylnes to se a fayre lady, and that ys every good knyghtes parte to behold a fayre lady" (453). Isode is entirely silent during this encounter, and Malory does not narrate the events from her perspective at all. Readers are left to assume that she watches and is aware of the events taking place around her, but Isode is entirely passive in this scene. Her silence suggests that although women often receive credit for knightly deeds in the *Morte Darthur* and do serve as the motivation for a great deal of the combat in the work, Geraldine Heng is correct in saying that "the enchantment of love defines clear limits in the end for feminine play. By its nature it allows only an indirect presence and vicarious participation for women" (289). Women may inadvertently inspire heroic deeds in

their lovers simply by looking at them, but to find instances where female characters are themselves empowered by their sense of sight, one must look to their role as spectators within the panopticon rather than as courtly lovers.[1] As spectators, women serve important roles in tournament culture, enforcing rules and narrating events.

Malory frequently uses the vantage point of spectators as a narrative device. A number of spectators throughout "The Tournament at Lonezep" serve to move the plot along. Isode, Arthur, Lancelot, Palomides, Tristram, and Dynadan are among those who watch and take note of other characters' actions throughout the chapter. As Malory moves between spectators on and off the field, he reveals action to the reader and helps the reader inter-pret that action. For example, in describing the first day of the tournament Malory uses a variety of perspectives to weave the narrative together: "So whan La Beall Isode aspyed sir Trystram agayne uppon his horse bak she was passynge glad, and than she lowghe and made good chere" (448). At this point, readers watch Tristram with Isode and identify with her perspective. In the next sentence, though, Malory shifts the viewpoint to that of Palomedes: "And as hit happened, sir Palomydes loked up toward her; she was in the wyndow, and sir Palomydes aspyed how she lawghed. And therewyth he toke such a rejoysynge that he smote downe, what wyth his speare and wyth hys swerde, all that ever he meete, for thorow the syght of her he was so enamered in her love" (448). In this passage, then, readers look up at Isode from Palomides' perspective. Sentences later, Malory changes the perspective again so that Palomides is observed by Tristram and Dynadan: "And than sir Trystram behylde hym how he styrred aboute, and seyde unto sir Dynadan, 'So God me helpe, sir Palomydes ys a passynge good knyghte and a well endurynge, but suche dedis sawe I hym never do, nother never erste herde I tell that ever he ded so muche in one day'" (448). In this scene, Malory uses the narrative technique of multiple perspectives to emphasize the love triangle he is developing between Tristram, Isode, and Palomides and to reveal a complete picture of the action to readers. Malory invites readers to assume a role in the panopticon as he reveals information through the eyes of spectators. This narrative device forces readers to identify with the positions of individual spectators, much as a point-of-view shot does in film. It also foregrounds the reader's dependence on narration for information about events and serves as a reminder that the position of reader is always also the position of spectator.

Malory's spectators are able to play such an important role in the story as narrators and judges because the tournament list operates under the same principles as Bentham's Panopticon even though the physical spaces of each are quite different from one another. Malory does not describe any list in detail in the *Morte Darthur*, but physical descriptions and artistic representations of the fifteenth-century tournament space demonstrate that lists were designed primarily to provide a clear view of the combat to spectators, just as the Panopticon was designed to provide maximum visibility to prison guards. The design of both spaces resulted in uncertainty on the part of those on display as to who was watching them at any given moment. Foucault describes Bentham's Panopticon as a prison with cells construct-ed in a ring around a central tower. Each cell has two windows, one on the outside, allowing light into the cell and backlighting the prisoners, and one on the inside, allowing the prison guards to watch the "captive shadows" within the "small theatres" of the cells (Foucault 200). Because of the design and backlighting, prisoners can never tell when they are being watched and must assume that they are always being watched. The tournament field reverses these specifications. Steven Pederson describes the fifteenth-century "tournament theatre" (26) in detail, outlining the most common staging practices for chivalric contest. He explains that tournaments were most likely to "take place in a specially constructed enclosed area known as a 'list' [. . .]. Later the lists were enclosed, usually in a quadrangular shape, often being longer than broad by one-fourth" (25). Lists might be construct-ed in an outdoor setting or very near a stronghold such as a castle. Wherever they were erected, however, lists "were constructed so as to keep the combatants and their horses inside and the spectators safely outside" (Pederson 27). Spectators watched tournaments from scaffolds erected outside the lists or from windows of adjourning strongholds, to protect them from the violence of the tournament and to give them a panoramic view of the action taking place (Pederson 42-43). The tournament field positions spectators on the outside while those being watched are concentrated together in the center. The physical difference between the Panopticon and the list primarily reflects the different purposes of a prison and a combat tournament, but both are based on a similar principle. In both cases, spectators are positioned to give them an unobstructed view and those being watched can never tell who is watching them at any

given time. As a result, they must assume that they are being watched all the time and behave accordingly.

In his study on fifteenth-century spectatorship, Seth Lerer suggests that the fifteenth century saw "a new emphasis on vision and display" (52) that is evident in late medieval texts such as the *Morte Darthur* and medieval illuminations. He suggests that "new ways of apprehending books and bodies in this period gave rise to [. . .] the making of a seeing self, a sense of personal identity as view, spectator, or reader" (32). Fifteenth-century spectators were conscious of their role as spectators, capable of exercising control over others through that role. This consciousness is clearly portrayed in medieval illuminations, many of which depict Arthurian scenes and themes. Artists were well aware of the importance of spectators to tournament culture as evidenced by illuminated manuscripts.[2] These manuscripts are invaluable for what they reveal about the physical tournament space as well as the relative importance of spectators.

Fig. 1 (Bodleian Library, MS Douce 383, fol. 6r) depicts combat between two knights taking place before Arthur and several other spectators. Spectators watch the combat from wooden and enclosed scaffolds erected outside of the list as well as from a position outside the list on the ground. Those spectators in the scaffolds have a bird's eye position from which to watch the combat taking place, and the number of spectators included in the drawing demonstrates their importance. There are nine spectators included in relation to the two knights, and the spectators are foregrounded along with the knights so that the spectators' facial expressions are clearly evident. All eyes are fo-cused on the knights. Two men and three women watch from the scaffolds, emphasizing that within a panopticon, both men and women exercise control with their power of sight.

In Fig. 2 (Bodleian Library, MS Douce 383, fol. 16r), two knights are literally enclosed within an arena of spectators. This illumination also depicts a combat taking place before Arthur, and it is useful for the types of spectators represented. In this case, there are four scaffold windows filled with male and female spectators, including Arthur and the other nobles. In a gallery below the scaffold windows, a group of musicians sit waiting to play, and on the ground immediately outside the list, several knights wearing armor watch the tournament. This list is rectangular in shape, and both sides of the list shown are completely lined with spectators. They are positioned above, level with, and below the knights fighting on

horseback. Spectatorship is depicted as cutting across gender lines as all become equal with their ability to see and make judgments based on seeing.

A third illumination, Fig. 3 (Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 828, fol. 62), does not represent the list but still demonstrates the importance of spectators and highlights the connection between spectator and reader. A small scene is pictured in the left-hand corner of the illumination. Although the scene does not include any spectators, the artist incorporated spectators into the illumination creatively, and two heads are turned toward the scene from other places on the manuscript page. One head (not pictured in Fig. 3) perches on the decorative border running around the page. This head, which is on the right of the page, faces left and is unmistakably represented as watching the scene. Another, obviously female, head is incorporated into the first letter of the text, sitting within an O immediately beneath the scene. The female face is turned upward, watching the scene above. Although these spectators are positioned outside of the scene they are not separate from it since they are so plainly depicted as gazing toward it. Even more significantly, the female head within the O connects illustration and text and points out that the manuscript's readers are spectators of both.

Malory supports the idea that spectators might be either men or women and that they exercise power through their ability to see. Isode appears as a spectator in the Tristram chapter several times as does Guinevere. Malory portrays Isode as the ideal female spectator in the chapter "Tournament at Lonezep," and he demonstrates that women can participate even within a combat culture through assuming the role of spectator.

Isode watches the tournament at Lonezep from beginning to ending. The text says that "they lad La Beall Isode thidir as she sholde stande and beholde all the justes in a bay-wyndow; but allwayes she was wympled, that no man myght see her vysyge." (444). Isode does not watch the tournament from a spectator scaffold but rather from the window of an adjacent "pryory" (453). Malory makes a point to mention that Isode can see all the action of the joust (444, 453). Isode's position and the fact that she wears a veil mean that although Tristram and his party know where Isode is standing, no one else can casually glance up at her and see who she is. Thus, Isode is watching from behind a mask. She may make judgments about those fighting below her, but they may not make judgments about her. Isode's veil is an important detail for Malory to

add because it allows her to actively participate in the pageantry of the combat while also emphasizing her role as critic of the performance. The veil highlights her role within the panopticon; because she is wearing a veil, it is impossible for anyone to tell from a distance exactly what she is looking at. Additionally, it allows her to participate in the spectacle of the tournament because Isode's veil is part of her "costume." Malory describes the attire that Tristram's party wears to the first day of the tournament in some detail, saying, "they were arrayed all in grene trapurs, bothe shyldis and spearys, and La Beall Isode in the same coloure, and her three damesels" (444). Isode is identified with Tristram's party, then, because of the color of clothes she wears, and just as Tristram and the rest of his party disguise their identity, she is disguised by the veil she wears throughout the tournament.

Isode's position serves a narrative function in the text as well. Malory turns to Isode's perspective again and again to re-veal information to readers such as the moment "whan quene Isode saw sir Trystram unhorsed and she wyst nat where he was becom, than she wepte hartely. But sir Trystram, whan he was redy, cam daysshynge lyghtly into the fylde, and than La Beall Isode aspyed hym" (447). Malory also elevates Isode's position as spectator by allowing her to be the only person to witness Palomides' betrayal of Tristram. Malory helps readers know how to regard Palomides' actions based on Isode's reaction. The text says, "she was wrothe oute of mesure wyth sir Palomydes, for she saw all his treson frome the begynnyge to the endynge" (459). Isode's position as spectator also reveals that although she is not an official judge, she has a complete understanding of tournament rules and culture, and she is not watching only Tristram throughout the tournament as might be expected of a courtly lover.

Palomides and Isode's behavior at the Tournament at Lon-ezep demonstrate the essential differences between courtly love and spectatorship. Isode is not the only person watching in this chapter. Palomides engages in the tradition of courtly love by using Isode as inspiration for his martial prowess as he looks at her. Palomides is encouraged to win honor because of the love he feels: "sir Palomydes wysshed that wyth his worshyp he myght have ado wyth sir Trystram before all men, bycause of La Beall Isode" (448). As he fights, Palomides continues to "kaste up his yee unto La Beall Isode" (448) for inspiration; in fact, it is difficult to understand how he manages to fight so well while gazing away from his opponents. Malory makes it clear that Palomides is no match for Tristram,

though; and the text undercuts Palomides' achievements on the field by reminding us that Palomides is jealous of Tristram's relationship with Isode and seeks to undermine Tristram in battle. Dynadan and Arthur also call Palomides' motives into question throughout the Tournament at Lonezep (456). Eventually, Palomides feels led to betray Tristram on the field in the hope of shaming his rival (456), and he concocts a plan to do so. He will exchange armor with a wounded knight, engage Tristram in battle and be overcome, Lancelot will take up the fight against Tristram, and Tristram will be defeated in battle by Lancelot. This plan allows Palomides to reap the maximum benefit from the least amount of work. He only has to put the plan into action, then Lancelot will do the rest.

Palomides' plan is a good one, and he nearly pulls it off except that he forgets about the presence of spectators. In his desperation to steal Tristram's honor for himself, ironically in order to please Isode as courtly love dictates, it seems likely that Palomides simply forgets that Isode can watch him just as he watched her in order to motivate himself to battle. When Palomides leaves the list in order to exchange armor with the wounded knight, he mistakenly assumes that Isode will not or cannot see him when he is away from the field. The text reports, however, that "full well knew La Beall Isode that hit was sir Palomydes that faught wyth sir Trystram, for she aspyed all in her wyndow where that she stood, how sir Palomydes chaunged hys harnes wyth the wounded knyght" (457). It is no coincidence that Isode happens to be the only spectator to catch Palomides at cheating. Malory elevates the position of the spectator over that of the lover in this scene, reinforcing his commitment to combat as his primary theme and demonstrating the power of sight to enforce social codes. As such, it is important that the love object exert herself as independently capable of observing and making judgments of the action she sees.

Malory reveals the power of the panoptic gaze in medieval culture when Palomides loses the honor he had formerly acquired as a result of looking to Isode for inspiration. He also demonstrates Isode's familiarity with courtly politics when she reveals the truth about Palomides to Tristram. Tristram chooses to pardon his betrayer, and the text says, "Than La Beall Isode hylde downe her hede and seyde no more at that tyme" (460). Isode's silence seems to represent her political savvy. The phrase "at that tyme" suggests that she understands the importance of letting Tristram make a gesture of generosity by forgiving Palomides and of honoring that gesture by

speaking no more about the subject in that context. She speaks up again on the next page, though, when Arthur questions Palomides' actions. When Arthur asks who fought with Tristram, Isode says, "Sir, wyte you well that hit was he" (461). This time her words prompt Arthur to pronounce Palomides' actions "unknyghtly" (461), and Palomides loses all the honor he had formerly acquired.

This reversal of Palomides' fortune is significant. He acquired his worship in battle on the first day of the tournament by looking at Isode for inspiration (448). He was completely within the bounds of courtly love to gaze at her; yet in doing so, he objectified his love and even denied to himself her ability to see. Malory uses this chapter to demonstrate the power of the panoptic gaze, and he privileges spectatorship as practiced in the fifteenth century over courtly love ideals of sight. Isode's position of spectator, then, is elevated above Palomides' position of lover, and Malory offers Isode the power and freedom of a critic within the culture of spectatorship.

To some extent, characters in the *Morte Darthur* do not choose to act as critics, they simply are critics because of their social knowledge and because they are entrenched in a shame-based society where public honor is awarded or removed by spectators (i.e. a panopticon). Foucault speaks of the discreet, but pervasive nature of social control in *Discipline and Punish*, and in "The Book of Sir Tristram" characters are drawn into a policing role very insidiously as they enforce the chivalric code at tournaments. This role does offer women an opportunity to participate in tournament culture and the ability to directly control knightly behavior. As a result, the study of spectatorship proves fruitful ground for those interested in examining the role of female characters in the *Morte Darthur*. Such a study reveals that as spectators, women (and men) motivate the action of other characters, enforce rules, comment on action for readers, and fill in the Arthurian landscape. Malory demonstrates the importance of the position by using it as a narrative device in the story, and he ultimately uses the spectators he creates to show his own spectators, his readers, how to read the *Morte Darthur*.

Fig. 1. Tournament Scene with Spectators from Guiron de Courtois (fragments), French, before 1500. Bodleian Library, Oxford MS Douce 383, fol. 6r Reproduced by permission.

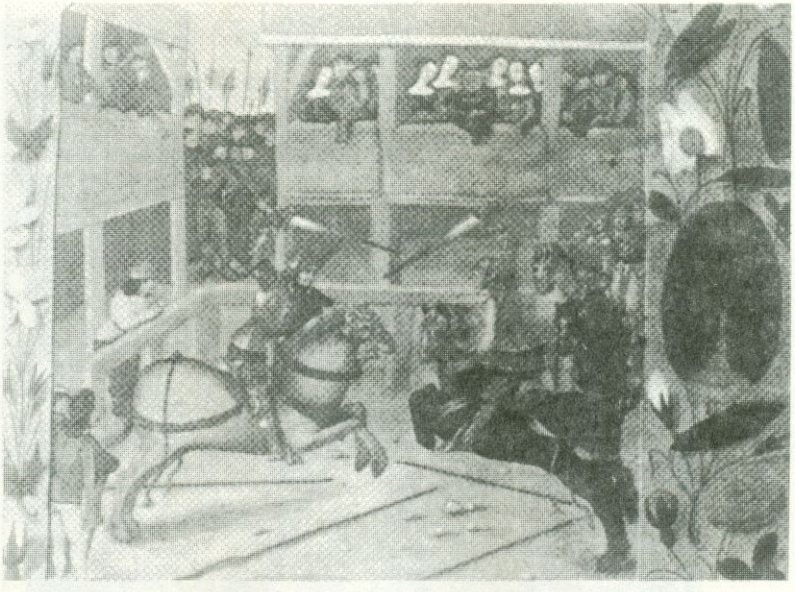

Fig.2. Tournament Scene with Spectators from Guiron de Courtois (fragments), French, before 1500.
Bodleian Library, Oxford MS Douce 383, fol. 16r
Reproduced by permission.

Fig. 3. Female Spectator Incorporated into Text from Lancelot Cycle, Branch 3, early-fourteenth century.
Bodleian Library, Oxford MS Ashmole 828, fol. 62r
Reproduced by permission.

## Notes

My thanks go to Thomas Ohlgren for his encouraging and useful comments on several drafts of this paper, as well as for his help in locating the images included in my essay.

[1] It is worth noting that Guinevere does exert a measure of power through her role as courtly lover, and as a spectator at the judicial jousts in her honor she influences knightly deeds. In "The Knight of the Cart," Lancelot fights on behalf of Guinevere against Mellyagaunce. The text reports that during the battle, "sir Lancelot loked uppon the quene, gyff he myght aspye by ony sygne or countenaunce what she wolde have done. And anone the quene wagged hir hede uppon sir Launcelot, as ho seyth 'sle hym'. And full well knew sir Launcelot by her sygnys that she wold have hym dede" (Malory 662). Lancelot fulfills Guinevere's wish and kills Mellyagaunce. As this example suggests, then, the role of courtly lover can be empowering for women. Heng points out that "Knightly obedience to and cooperation with the feminine supply effective means for actualisations of feminine will, creating an agency by which women may be active in the world" (288). This type of power, however, is afforded to women rarely in the *Morte Darthur*, and this example is outside of the bounds of my paper as it does not occur in the "Book of Sir Tristram" or in the tournament space.

[2] Although the three illuminations that I consider in this paper were originally included in French, rather than English, manuscripts, the depiction of female spectators in illuminated manuscripts was widespread in medieval manuscripts from England as well as France. I chose to include these French illuminations because they represent three particularly clear examples of the importance of female spectators to tournament combat. Even more importantly, Malory's source for the "The Book of Sir Tristram" was the French Prose *Romance of Tristram*; Malory may have even had access to an illuminated manscript, which would certainly have been available at the time he was writing (Vinaver 749).

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